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ABSTRACT

Parents of children in elementary and secondary school foreign language programs want to know what outcomes they can expect from the programs and how they can support and encourage their children's language study. Learning outcomes vary with program goals. Program types include immersion, partial immersion, foreign language in elementary schools (FLES), and foreign language experience or exposure (FLEX). The parent's influence on the child can be both passive and active, but active encouragement is associated with better language learning. Parents can demonstrate their positive attitude toward language learning by actively participating in a variety of ways at home, at school, and in the community. At home, parents can encourage, but should not push, their children by praising them for their growing interest and ability and knowledge of the foreign culture. At school, parents can establish a positive relationship with the teacher and staff, volunteer to help, and share with the teacher evidence of the child's progress. Families can also help educate the community about the value of foreign language learning and establish new programs. There are many organizational and information resources available to parents for these purposes. (MSE)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CHILDREN: THE PARENTAL ROLE

ERIC Q&A

November 1987

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Washington, D.C.

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Q&A

Foreign Language Learning and Children: The Parental Role

Prepared by Marcia H. Rosenbusch

November 1987

A survey completed in the 1986-87 school year on a random sample of five percent of the nation's elementary and secondary schools indicated that the number of foreign language programs at the elementary school level (FLES) has increased in this country since 1981. Approximately one fifth of the responding elementary schools reported that foreign language classes are currently being offered (Rhodes & Oxford, 1987).

Parents of children participating in these classes want to know what learning outcomes they can expect from their children's program and how they, as parents, can support and encourage their children in the study of a foreign language. The parents' own abilities with the foreign language would determine, in part, their options. The questions addressed here will be considered from the standpoint of the role of parents who may, or may not, have some familiarity with the language, but who are not bilingual.

What Learning Outcomes Can Parents Expect for Their Children?

The learning outcomes vary with the goals of the program and the success of the program in meeting its goals. The following descriptions of program types and goals will help parents have realistic expectations about the learning outcomes for their children.

Immersion. Grades K-6 (continuous). 50-100% of class time is spent in the foreign language (FL). *Goal:* to become functionally proficient in the foreign language (to be able to communicate on topics appropriate to the age almost as well as native speakers).

Partial Immersion. Grades K-6 (continuous). Approximately 50% of class time is spent learning subject matter in FL. *Goals:* to become proficient in the foreign language; to acquire an understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

FLES. Grades K-6 (continuous). 5-50% of time spent learning the foreign language. *Goals:* to acquire a certain level of skill development in listening and speaking (the amount depends on the program); to acquire an understanding and appreciation of other cultures; to acquire limited reading and writing skills (in some programs).

FLEX (Foreign Language Experience). Grades K-6 (not continuous). Approximately 5% of time spent learning language and about language--usually taught mostly in English. *Goals:* to develop an interest in foreign languages for future language study; to learn basic words and phrases on an informal basis; to develop good listening skills; to develop cultural awareness (Lipton, Rhodes, & Curtain, 1987).

Can Parents Influence Their Children's Success in Learning a Foreign Language?

The learner's positive attitude toward the foreign language and the people who speak it has been noted to be significantly related to success in learning the language (Gardner, 1968; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). It has also been observed that parents play a major role in shaping their children's attitudes. Parents' attitudes toward the language and the people affect their children's success in learning the language (Feenstra, 1969; Lambert & Klineberg, 1967).

The influence of the parent on the child can be both passive (the parent's attitude) and active (direct encouragement or involvement in the child's learning) (Colletta, Clement, & Edwards, 1983; Gardner, 1968). The active role of the parent has been observed to be related to better foreign language achievement in the elementary school child. It also has been observed that parents can be effective active supporters of their children's foreign language learning without themselves having skill in the foreign language (Hayman, Johnson, & Mayers, 1964).

How Can Parents Actively Support Their Children's Learning of the Foreign Language?

Parents can demonstrate their positive attitude toward the learning of a foreign language by actively participating in their children's learning both at home and at school. Parents can also show their support for foreign language education in the community. To help parents begin to plan how they will encourage their children's learning, guidelines for action and ideas for possible activities to be carried out at home, school, and community follow:

In The Home:

Guidelines: Encourage your children, but don't demand their participation; respect their feelings. Praise them for their growing interest and ability in the foreign language and their knowledge about the foreign culture.

Ideas:

•Read stories, poems, picture dictionaries, dialogues, skits,

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and folktales with your children in English and/or the foreign language.
•Share audiotapes, videocassettes, and records in the foreign language obtained from the library, bookstore, or specialty catalogs.
•Play both active games and board games in the foreign language.
•Explore folk art in books and museums; experiment at home with similar materials and designs.
•Label objects in your home to practice words together with your children.
•Make a picture dictionary together using drawings or magazine cutouts to illustrate words.
•Learn key phrases and expressions and use them together in everyday routines.
•Play games in the foreign language during car trips.
•Give commands to your pet in the foreign language.
•Sing songs with your children in the foreign language.
•Establish a play group for your young child with children of families who speak or are learning to speak the foreign language.
•Look for food items in supermarkets with labels in the foreign language. Examine them with your children.
•Try foods from the foreign country, prepared at home, or served in a restaurant.
•Help your children obtain pen pals from the country where the language is spoken, and encourage them to communicate regularly with them.
•Encourage your child to attend a foreign language camp.
•Encourage your child to find news items about a country where the foreign language is spoken.
•Subscribe to a foreign language magazine or newspaper. Read interesting items with your children.
•Give some gifts that have educational value such as games, records, posters or stationery with sayings in the foreign language.
•Encourage your children to listen to shortwave radio broadcasts in the foreign language.
•Invite guests to your home who are native speakers or who have traveled or lived in the country where the foreign language is spoken. Try especially to include children who speak the foreign language.
•Host an exchange student from a country where the foreign language is spoken.
•Visit a country with your children where the foreign language is spoken.

In Your Child's School:
Guidelines: Establish a positive relationship with the school staff and the teacher of your child's group. Volunteer to help the teacher and suggest ways in which your abilities might be helpful. Encourage home-school communication. Share with the teacher evidence of your own child's growth in the foreign language so that the teacher knows his or her work is successful and appreciated. Ask for information about what the children are learning and ask how you can support that learning at home.
Ideas:
•Encourage the teacher to meet with parents to explain the program and seek their active support for it.
•Develop a survey of parents to determine how they could support the program and who could share special abilities and information with the children.
•Prepare a meeting room with refreshments when parents and teachers meet.
•Establish a telephone communication link with parents to inform them of meetings.
•Prepare a calendar of community events which relate to the foreign language and share it with the teacher and other families.
•Help organize and prepare a newsletter for parents that would facilitate home–school communication.
•Help in the classroom with special projects.
•Prepare classroom teaching materials such as puppets, flashcards, etc.
•Share slides and realia from your trip to a foreign country.
•Seek native speakers and other volunteers who can share their experiences of a foreign country with the class.
•Help organize special events and festivities, such as a foreign language fair.
•Help transport children on field trips by driving your car.
•Take photographs of special events and help write a news release for the local newspaper.
•Give financial support for the purchase of special teaching materials.
•Help establish a foreign language immersion weekend or camp, if one doesn't already exist.

In the Community:
Guidelines: Keep a high profile in the community. Educate the community about the value of foreign language learning. Inform the community about the success of the foreign language program. Help establish new programs.
Ideas:
•Examine the news for information in support of foreign languages. Share this information with others.
•Join organizations that support elementary school foreign language learning at the local, state, and national levels. Study the information they provide and share it with others. Attend their meetings.
•Establish a local parent support group for foreign language education if none exists.
•Work to organize new programs in schools in your area that do not have elementary school foreign language programs.
•Help assure publicity for the foreign language programs in your area throughout the school year, but especially for special events.
•Help raise funds for special projects in foreign language education.
•Communicate with your local, state, and national officials in support of foreign language education. Encourage others to do the same.
•Offer to speak to local organizations in support of foreign language education.
•Attend school board meetings and speak up in support of the foreign language programs in your community.
•Work for articulation between levels of foreign language education: elementary school, middle school, high school, and college.

Resources

Sources for books, games, songs, and other teaching materials to use with children.

- Bilingual Publications Co.
  1966 Broadway, New York, NY 10023
- Children's Book and Music Center
  Box 1130, Santa Monica, CA 90406
- Gessler Publishing Co., Inc.
  900 Broadway, New York, NY 10003-1291
- Imported Books
  P.O. Box 4414, Dallas, TX 75208
- Langenscheidt Publishers, Inc.
  46-35 54th Rd. Naspeth, NY 11378
- National Textbook Co.
  4255 W. Touhy Ave., Lincolnwood, IL 60646-1975

Organizations for parents and teachers of elementary school foreign language programs. Both publish newsletters.

- Advocates for Language Learning (ALL).
  Madeleine Ehrlich, Box 4964, Culver City, CA 90231
- National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL).
  Nancy C. Rhodes, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, DC 20037.

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For Further Reading

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